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Carpenter, Edward

Our parish & our Duke

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No 12

OUR PARISH & OUR DUKE:

A LETTER TO THE

PARISHIONERS OF HOLMESFIELD, IN DERBYSHIRE.

FELLOW-PARISHIONERS,

When one is inside a coppice or planting it is difficult to see its shape; as they say, one cannot see the wood for the trees. So it is difficult for some of us to get a true idea of the circumstances and conditions in which we live, *because* we are in the midst of them and accustomed to them. I want to say a few words about our Parish. As you know it is a rather large and straggling parish—of 4600 acres in extent—with a comparatively small population, 500 souls, all told. We consist mostly of farmers and farm-laborers, with a few miners, woodmen, small tradesmen, &c.; and we consider ourselves a pretty hard-working industrious lot. It is true we sometimes get too much beer: but I suppose that is because we cannot get wine. Sometimes we have a tea and a dance; but on the whole we lead a very quiet life. We like custom, and to do things in the same old way as our fathers and grandfathers did; and, as far as I can make out, we like to bear the same old burdens that they bore. Our backs are broad, and for the matter of that they are bent too; some of them indeed so much so that we can no longer look up to heaven, but only at the old earth on which we toil.

In short, notwithstanding that we have plenty of land, and not such bad land either, we are very poor in this parish of ours and can hardly do more than just keep going. What is the reason of this state of affairs and how long is it to continue?

There may be several reasons for our poverty, but one is very clear. It is this: We have to pay more than £2,200 in rent to our Dukes and other landlords *every year*. In fact the gross estimated rental of the parish is put at £3,207; but since we have a good many small freeholders the amount actually paid is reduced to £2,200. Nearly the whole of this goes straight off out of the parish and never comes back again. Every year we have to pay this great tax before we can feed and clothe ourselves. Of course it falls most directly on the farmers, but since what they pay in rent they cannot pay in wages, &c., it practically falls, one way or other, on the whole parish. There are about 100 families in the parish; thus each family has on the average to contribute over £20 a year to keep the landlords going. How about the bent backs? Considering that the average income per family is probably under £50, a tax of £20 a year is sufficient by itself to account for them, I think. In the old Feudal times there was a custom called *corvée* by which the cultivators of the land were forced to give 3 days work out of the 6 to the barons, but it appears that we give 2 out of 5 to our landlords.

The old word *duke* meant a leader, and dukes were once really leaders. Duke William of Normandy who conquered England was a leader. He was a rough sort of chap, but at any rate he was a *man*. When his troops, exhausted with fatigue on the road to Chester, were stopped by a snowdrift, duke William jumped off his horse and shoveled the snow away himself from before them; but I don't find that our dukes now-a-days shovel much snow away for us.

In the year 1820 a great event happened in the parish of Holmesfield. That was the enclosure of the commons; and it forms another reason for our poverty. Before that time there were 2570 acres of common land in our parish (think of it, more than half of the whole parish!)—very valuable of course to cottagers and small farmers. Here was pasture for cows, sheep, pigs, geese; here in the woods was firewood to be got, and bracken for bedding; on the moors, rabbits, bilberries, turf for fuel, &c. But the Dukes and the landlords coveted this 2570 acres; they said (and there was truth in the statement) that being common land it was not so well cultivated as it would be if in the hands of private individuals; and that *therefore* (but I am not so sure that there was any truth in that) it ought to be divided up, and that *they* were the parties to whom it should be given! Besides, they said, they had rights of tithes, &c., over the parish, which they would give up if the land was divided among them. Any how they got it; and in the year 1821 the Holmesfield Enclosure Act came into operation, and the commons 'went in.' If you look in the Enclosure Award Book which Mr. Anthony Morgan keeps for us at Holmesfield you will see the details of the proceeding. As it says in the Bible: "To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he (thinketh he) hath." The then Duke of Rutland, being a great haver, got the lion's share. A lion's claws have only five points; but the Duke's clause in the Award Book had six! They are given as follows:—

	A. R.	
1. "As Improprator for Tithes of corn, grain and hay; and in lieu of and full compensation for all manner of Tithes both great and small" (a tithe is a tenth part—if the Duke had got a tenth part of the whole land of the parish it would have been 460 acres, but he got)	1381	3
2. "As Lord of the Manor" and in compensation for certain manorial rights, "and for his consent to the said enclosure"	138	2
3. "For Chief Rents" amounting in the whole to £14	28	2
4. "For enfranchisement of Copyholds"	11	3
5. "As Proprietor"	18	2
6. "By sale to defray the expenses of the Act" (which he had so kindly consented to get passed for us!)	449	1
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Thus did the duke of Rutland manage to get nearly 2000 acres for himself—the remaining 570 going to the other landlords. That was a fine stroke for a leader of the people! But the other leaders of the people in other parts of the kingdom were doing likewise, and so we find that in the 124 years from 1700 to 1880, Acts of Parliament were passed by which ten millions of acres of common lands were enclosed for private use. And now to-day in this parish there is not a little field or corner left—absolutely not a solitary acre out of all the vast domain which once belonged to the people—on which the village boys can play their game of cricket.

Indeed most valuable traets were enclosed in the very centre of Holmesfield itself—i.e. the 'common,' the 'Castle,' and many bits of land with cottages on by the roadside—and went curiously enough to the 'duke' of Rutland and 'squire' George Greaves, the two people one would think who had the least need to condescend to such petty robbery. It is worth noticing too that although the said duke took such a vast extent of common land from the people, he and his successors have managed to shirk nearly all the share of the rates. For while our lands are assessed at an average

of 20s. per acre, the duke's moorlands are only assessed at 2s. 6d. Of course the moorlands are below the average in value, but many of the farm-lands along the moor edges—hardly differing from the moors—are rated at 10s. per acre; and when a piece of the duke's land is wanted by us for a public improvement—as to-day for the proposed reservoir—then it appears to be quite up to the average in value, for he refuses to let us have it under £50 an acre! Before 1820, I may mention, there was a footpath over the moors from the top of Car Lane to Curbar—a great convenience to our parish—but after the enclosure the footpath was stopped, for the sake of the grouse, and no one I suppose in that time dared to say a word.

Nor is this the end of it all. The parishioners, impoverished by the yearly drain on their resources, and by the seizure of the common lands which once belonged to them, can no longer do justice to the lands which remain, and of which they are tenants. We write to the steward of one or other lord under whom we live, to ask for an abatement of our rent. The steward replies that he cannot grant it. In fact his business is to get as good a rent as he can for his lord, that is what he is put in his place for, we cannot expect any leniency from him. Then we write to the duke, and his reply is that he leaves all these matters in the hands of his steward! Thus are we tossed about from one to the other without redress. Meanwhile our land is starved for want of help, our capital is dwindling. They ask us why we do not go. But when a man has lived on a farm all his life, and perhaps his fathers before him, when he has to face the uprooting of his family and the sale of all his stock—these are things that give him pause; besides the seasons have been bad, they may be better; there are other methods of conducting the farm which may be tried, possibly with success; hope springs eternal in the human breast; and not till the last sixpence has been wrung from him, till the farmer is reduced to a position no better than that of his own laborers, need the landlord fear that his prey will slip through his fingers.

With our agriculture thus heavily handicapped in this country, do we still wonder that our markets are supplied to the extent they are with foreign produce? How can it well be otherwise?

It is certain that this state of affairs cannot and will not last very much longer. The landlord system is doomed. Already the question of the Nationalisation of the Land is being discussed by the authorities on these subjects. What do we mean by Nationalisation of the Land? Let us take an instance from our own parish. Supposing instead of paying that £2,200 of yearly rent out of the parish to dukes and other 'leaders' who spend it happen in Paris and London, we paid it to a parish council (we have county councils now, so we might soon have a parish council) to be used in the parish; and supposing we insisted on those common lands, filched from us, being restored. Then we might all stay on just as we are, but who are now tenants from our landlords would be tenants from the parish, and our lands would be parish lands again, or national lands, instead of belonging to private owners. Instead of suffering an exhausting drain upon our resources each year, we should have a handsome fund coming in for common use. And we think we know what we could do with such a fund!

In the first place it would pay all our highway and poor rates. Those two burdens would roll off our backs at once—and we should feel ever so much more cheerful. We could pay our aged, too, better than we do now—so that no one need fear lest this change should leave them unprotected for when past work. Then, since our highway and poor rates together amount on an average to about £530 a year, we should still have £1,670 to dispose of. What could we do with that? Many things. First of all we could

improve the wages of our road-menders and all other parish workers—and of these we should have a good many more than now; for we should take in hand the common lands and make something of them. The better parts we should improve and drain and turn them into farm-lands; the woodlands could be forested as now. We should have no difficulty in electing managers for this business, as we all know who are the best farmers and woodmen in our locality; and not only would it afford employment and wages to some of us who are in want, but the profits of these concerns would come back to the parish to further improve our condition. Meanwhile the people would again have access to a great part of the common lands for fuel and bracken and many other little matters which now are merely wasted or have become gamekeepers' perquisites. Further than this it would be possible to reduce rents generally in some degree; not that they could be abolished, but it is certain that if the parish were landlord the present mere starvation rents would no longer be exacted, milder and more equal treatment would be adopted, and exemptions and allowances would occasionally be made in cases where the farmer had suffered special ill-luck or losses; where now the landlord's agent is simply ignorant or pitiless. Improvements, too, in the way of public buildings, granaries, mills, free libraries, &c., might be undertaken; threshing machines and other expensive agricultural engines might be acquired for general use; free instruction and free dinners provided for the school-children; and so forth. In fact from the moment such a change was made the condition of our parish—freed from the great burden which weighs upon it—would run up 'by leaps and bounds'; and not only should we *be* a deal better off, but we should *feel* better, living on and cultivating lands that belonged to us, instead of aliens and outcasts as we now are in our own country.

But how *can* the change be made, it will be asked—is it not a sheer impossibility? 'Impossibility'—not at all. The same parliamentary power which took 2570 acres *from* us in 1820, and gave them to a few country gentlemen, could surely take the same acres (nay the whole 4,600 if it liked) *from* the country gentlemen, and give them back to us. No doubt some of these gentlemen will say the thing is 'impossible'; but that reminds me of a story. A man was one day describing to a friend a beaver hunt which he had witnessed. It was very exciting. "The dogs were close on the beaver," he said, "and it was at a loss what to do, when—it *ran up a tree*." "That's impossible," said the friend, "beavers don't climb trees."—"Aye, I know," replied the man, "but this one *had to*." All that is necessary for us is to show Parliament that this tree *has* to be climbed. There are plenty of earned men there who can find out how to do it, provided they know it must be done. In fact many of them to-day are discussing this question among themselves, how the change can be made, without great dislocation or injustice; and several methods are proposed, which I need not trouble you with now. The change must be effected gradually no doubt, and with all consideration possible; but made it must be. And the sooner we make up our minds the sooner it will be made.

EDWARD CARPENTER.

Millthorpe, Holmesfield.
March, 1889.

To be had of the Author, price 2/- per 100, post free.

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